U.S. Examines if Computer Used In '84 Election Is Open to Fraud

By DAVID BURNHAM
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WASHINGTON, Sept. 23 — A branch of the National Security Agency is investigating whether a computer program that counted more than one-third of all the votes cast in the United States in 1984 is vulnerable to fraudulent manipulation.

The National Security Agency is the nation's largest and most secretive intelligence agency. Its principal job is to collect intelligence by eavesdropping on the electronic communications of the world and to protect the sensitive communications of the United States.

Mike Levin, a public information official for the agency's National Computer Security Center, said the investigation was initiated under the authority of a recent Presidential directive ordering the center to improve the security of major computer systems used by nonmilitary agencies such as the Federal Reserve Board and the Federal Aviation Administration and for such private purposes as banking.

The Computer Security Center was established three years ago to improve the security of computers within the military services but was recently given a broader mandate. The annual budgets and number of employees of the agency and the center are secret.

Focus on Elections

"We have no interest in any particular election," Mr. Levin said. "We are only interested in the possible misuse of computers to compile election results."

But Representative Dan Glickman, chairman of a House Science and Technology subcommittee that has held hearings on the role of the Computer Security Center, said he had "serious reservations" about a Defense Department agency such as the center's becoming involved in computer systems handling sensitive civilian matters like elections.

"The computer systems used by counties to collect and process votes has nothing to do with national security and I am really concerned about the National Security Agency's involvement," said Mr. Glickman, a Kansas Democrat.

The target of the Computer Security Center's investigation is the vote-counting program of Computer Election Systems of Berkeley, Calif., the dominant company in the manufacture and sale of computer voting apparatus. In 1984, the company's program and related equipment was used in more than 1,000 county and local jurisdictions to collect and count 34.4 million of the 93.7 million votes cast in the United States.

Mr. Levin said the Computer Security Center became interested in the question of the vulnerability of the company's programs because of separate pending lawsuits, brought in Indiana, West Virginia, Maryland and Florida, which have challenged the election results processed by it.

Two independent experts and expert computer consultants hired by the plaintiffs in three of the states have said the company's program used to process votes in West Virginia, Indiana and Maryland in 1980, 1982 and 1984 was poorly designed and subject to secret manipulation. In Indiana and West Virginia the company and county officials are charged with fraudulent manipulation of the votes. The suits in the other two states are aimed at county officials and not specifically the company.

John H. Kemp, president of the company, and county officials involved in the four lawsuits have denied that they were involved in any fraud and have strongly defended the design of the company's vote-processing system.

After the publication of a report in The New York Times about these allegations in late July, Frank Wladkowski, an official in the Computer Security Center, traveled to California to interview Mr. Kemp. He has also been interviewing other experts in the field.

Also working on the election computer program with the Computer Security Center is the Information Technologies Group of the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico.

Mr. Levin said the Government's investigation of the election system was undertaken to help the center fulfill the mission given to it and the National Security Agency by National Security Decision Directive 145, signed by President Reagan on Sept. 17, 1984.

"That directive calls upon us to improve the security standards of computers used for various applications all over the country," he said. The spokesman added that the center's major role was to develop security standards that computer concerns would then adopt.

Various aspects of the President's order broadening the Computer Security Center's role in protecting information of civilian agencies and in applying security measures have been questioned by Congress's General Accounting Office and the Institute for Electrical and Electronic Engineers, the world's largest engineering society.

In testimony before the House Government Operations Committee last week, for example, Milton J. Socolar, special assistant to the head of the accounting office, said the new role given the National Security Agency and the center by Mr. Reagan's directive "raises basic questions concerning the extent to which the Defense establishment should be involved in policy formulation and program administration within the Government's civilian agencies."

The engineering society, in its statement, said the order could lead to a kind of "regulation, restraint and monitoring" that might cause a "collision with constitutional principles of individual privacy and freedom of speech."